

THE EFFECT OF TEACHING PHRASAL VERBS THROUGH PICTURES ON EFL LEARNERS' ACTIVE APPLICATION OF PHRASAL VERBS IN SPEAKING

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ABSTRACT

Lexical items, because they are language specific forms are undoubtedly one of the most difficult tasks in learning a second language. Phrasal verbs perhaps further exacerbate this difficult task since the meaning of already known verbs changes drastically when combined with different particles. Hence, facilitating the learning of these commonly used elements in English is indeed an ELT concern. To this end, the purpose of this study was to examine whether teaching phrasal verbs through pictorial cues would significantly improve Iranian EFL learners' active usage of those phrasal verbs in speaking. To fulfill this purpose, 60 pre-intermediate students of Tehran's Bayan Salis Language School were selected from among 100 students attending courses in this establishment through taking part in a Preliminary English Test (PET) and randomly put into two experimental and control groups. The same content was taught to both groups which consisted of a number of phrasal verbs inter alia: while pictures were used in the experimental group for the teaching of these phrasal verbs, the students in the control group were taught the same items without pictures. An achievement post-test was administered to the students in both groups at the end of the instruction period and the mean scores of both groups on the test were compared through a t-test. The result showed that teaching phrasal verbs through pictures did have a significant effect on pre-intermediate EFL students' active application of phrasal verbs in speaking.

Keywords: Phrasal Verbs, Pictorial Teaching, Speaking.

INTRODUCTION

Many learners of English, if not the majority, aim at gaining a native-like knowledge of the language. Reaching this goal of course needs a native-like command of some elements that are used fairly commonly in everyday English such as the appropriate use of idioms, phrasal verbs, and collocations to mention a few. Familiarity with a wide range of such expressions and the ability to use them appropriately in the context are among the distinguishing factors that determine native-like command of English (Cowie & Mackin, 1993).

Elementary learners of the English language soon discover that there are dozens of word combinations whose meanings bear little or no relationship to the individual words from which they are composed. They learn for example, the words call and off and sometimes later find out that there is a special expression call off which means cancel. On another occasion, they may encounter the

expression off and on and surprisingly recognize that this is an adverb of frequency, not an expression of location or direction.

One category among these expressions is phrasal verbs which consist of a verb followed by an adverbial particle and are found commonly in fiction and conversation, referring most often to physical activities (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002). They have been classified differently in the ELT literature (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Jackendoff, 1997; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985; Zoerner, 1996). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), for instance, separate phrasal verbs into four semantic categories: literal, aspectual, idiomatic, and polysemous. Alexander (1988) presents the following combinations as the main types of phrasal verbs:

- i) Transitive prepositional verbs: e.g. listen to
- ii) Transitive phrasal verbs: e.g. bring up
- iii) Intransitive phrasal verbs: e.g. give in

iv) Transitive phrasal – prepositional verbs: e.g. put up with

The fourth category above refers to multi-word verbs containing in addition to the lexical verb, one adverb particle and a preposition. These combinations are largely restricted to informal English. Three-part combinations (verbs + particle + preposition) can have both idiomatic or non-idiomatic meanings such as put up with, look up to, come up with, and look forward to.

Alongside the above syntactic categorizations, phrasal verbs can also be classified from a semantic standpoint. Fraser (1976) divides these items into systematic, complete, and figurative while Zoemer (1996) discusses only two types: resultative and idiomatic. And Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) classify phrasal verbs as literal, aspectual, and idiomatic.

Despite the diversity in the typology of these verbs, there is little - if any - controversy regarding their importance in general English and thus teaching them to students taking general English courses (Hubbard, 1994; Levin, 1988; Pinker, 1996). Spolsky (1989) argues that including phrasal verbs in the instruction program is one way to expand the social context for EFL learners who have limited informal levels of exposure such as interaction with native speakers. This social context, he maintains, directly affects the motivation of students, their attitudes toward the target language, and their learning experience too (Spolsky, 1989).

One major skill that learners wish to perfect is speaking. As is true for other language skills, speaking plays a number of roles in language learning; cognizance of these roles will enable teachers to attend to them all and to see speaking as one important element in developing each language skill and conveying culture knowledge.

Speaking a foreign language for a learner is of course strenuous and must obviously be made easier. And making speaking easier seems to have more to do with the affective side of the learning process than with the cognitive (Stevick, 1980) with no magic cure for alleviating the anxiety but that "Success [in language teaching] depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (Stevick, 1980, p. 4). To further

emphasize the affective factors noted above, Lynch (1996, p. 113) recognizes the importance of the classroom climate for developing successful skills in communication by stating that, "Learners are not neutral pawns in the teacher's game, but individuals with positive and negative feelings about themselves and others. One of the skills of teaching is knowing how to create a positive atmosphere".

Whether it is speaking or any other skill that the pedagogical program is endeavoring to enhance and whether it is vocabulary, including idiomatic expressions, that it focuses on, one well-documented idea is learning as semiosis (Benson, 1997; Ginther, 2002; Grosvenor, Lawn, & Rousmaniere, 1999). According to this paradigm, learning is beyond what a person perceives. Furthermore, it is not whether a student knows the formal definition of what was seen or heard (i.e. knowledge), nor whether the student remembers details about what was seen or heard (i.e. mastery). Rather, learning is how a student perceives a sign as relevant, interprets that sign, and relates that interpretation to the object of what was mediated to the student. Through semiosis, the student's interpretation is connected with another person's interpretation to construct meaning (Driscoll & Rowley, 1997).

Pictorial teaching is one example of the semiosis paradigm through which learners' attention is precisely drawn to the context depicted in the picture. This of course allows the learners to solidify the meaning of the new items at a faster rate and with greater retention (Wiedenbeck, 1999). Pictures are generally beneficial for language learners because memory for pictures appears to be better than memory for words; yet visual information can be distracting for the learner in certain cases where they cannot interpret the meaning of the context correctly or when they decorate the text and do not convey any meaningful information (Chu, 1996; Schriver, 1997). Hence, the use of visuals in education, although consistently shown to aid learning, must be carefully planned. The use of visuals that steer the learner to the exciting or entertaining aspects of presentation rather than encouraging thoughtful analysis of the underlying meaning may interfere with the intent of the lesson (Sherry, 1996). In addition, Schriver (1997) suggests that visuals must be properly used in the

educational setting since visualization alone does not function to maximize student achievement. Therefore, it seems very important "to bring words and pictures together in harmonious ways" (Schriver, 1997, p. 411).

The ability to comprehend and produce phrasal verbs is an essential component of proficiency in foreign language while many EFL learners may be satisfied with less than native-like command of the English language and ignore using the phrasal verbs (Benson, 1997). Idiomatic usage is so common in English that it can be somewhat difficult to communicate effectively without using phrasal verbs. For many verbs in English there are also phrasal verbs with the same meaning that native speakers use frequently; this actually may be one of the reasons why EFL learners have problems in understanding native speakers' speech. The learning of phrasal verbs must therefore be considered as an integral part of language proficiency. To this end, teaching phrasal verbs is common practice in ELT. Many current EFL textbooks have some sections dedicated to teaching phrasal verbs. And many EFL learners are themselves interested in learning phrasal verbs because of their frequency in English language.

This study was thus conducted to find out whether pictorial teaching of phrasal verbs affects EFL learners' active application of those items in speaking. Accordingly, the following null hypothesis was formulated:

H_0 : Pictorial teaching of phrasal verbs does not have any significant effect on pre-intermediate EFL learners' active application of phrasal verbs in speaking.

Method

To achieve the purpose of the study, a series of steps were taken which are described below chronologically.

Participant Selection

As the first step, a sample Preliminary English Test (PET) which was to determine the 60 participants required for this study had to be piloted. Thus, the test was administered to 34 pre-intermediate subjects with almost the same characteristics as the target sample - from the same language school. An item analysis was conducted proving that none of the items were faulty. Furthermore, the reliability was also calculated to be 0.85.

The second step was to select the participants of the study through the administration of the PET to 100 learners. In order to satisfy and ensure the assumption of homogeneity of the sample group, only 60 pre-intermediate participants whose scores fell within the range of one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as the participants of the study and were randomly assigned to four classes, two for the experimental and two for the control groups (the number of learners in each class could not exceed 15 and thus two classes were needed for the 30 participants in each group).

It is worth noting that in both the piloting and administration of the PET, the Cambridge General Mark Schemes for Speaking was employed to rate the speaking and writing sections. The inter-rater reliability of the two raters was also established (detailed in the results section).

Following the selection and assignment, a multiple-choice test on phrasal verbs was administered. The rationale for using this 20-item multiple-choice test was to make sure that the participants were not familiar with the phrasal verbs planned to be taught during the treatment period. The test was designed by the researchers and was administered following the random assignment of the participants to both groups. The results of the test clearly indicated that the participants were almost completely unfamiliar with the phrasal verbs in both groups thus allowing the researchers to rest assured that any probable difference at the end of the treatment between the two could be attributed to the treatment and not their prior knowledge.

Treatment

With the two groups in place, the treatment commenced. The teacher (one of the researchers), the course book, and the language content were all the same in both groups. Alongside the various components of the course taught equally in fashion and extent to both groups, the teacher also taught 24 phrasal verbs (Appendix A) to the students of both groups throughout the 18 sessions of the course held three days a week. In the control group, the teacher taught each phrasal verb from the book with their exact meaning. At first, she wrote the phrasal verb on the board in a sentence, asked the learners to guess the meaning, and taught them the exact meaning of the phrasal verb using a

main verb.

In the experimental group, on the other hand, the teacher taught the same phrasal verbs through using pictures (Appendix B). She would post two pictures (produced by a professional illustrator) on the board for instruction, ask students to guess the meaning of this picture, and give them the phrasal verb. Again, they were asked to guess the meaning and once they did so, the teacher would say the exact meaning of the phrasal verb using a main verb.

Posttest

Once the instruction period was over, the speaking posttest was conducted among both groups. For the posttest, the researchers designed a test containing 10 questions which the participants in both groups had to respond to. The questions were designed in such a way that the respondents could use the phrasal verbs they had been taught during the treatment. The *raison d'être* of this test was to see whether the participants in the experimental and control groups used a significantly different number of phrasal verbs in the process of responding to these questions. No other aspect of the performance of the participants on this test, such as fluency, pronunciation, and lexical diversity was rated since they were not relevant to the dependent variable under study.

Results

All the data analysis procedures and results of this study are presented and discussed below again in the chronological order of participant selection and posttest administration which led to testing the hypothesis.

Participant Selection Data Analysis

Following the piloting of the test, it was administered among 100 EFL learners; the descriptive statistics conducted after this administration of the test showed that the mean was 43.12 and the standard deviation 13.79 (Table 1).

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
PET Administration	100	10	69	43.12	13.79	.086	.241
Valid N (listwise)	100						

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the PET Administration

The reliability of the PET in this actual administration for homogenization of the participants was calculated standing at 0.84 thus reassuring the researchers of the reliability of the test.

The inter-rater reliability of the two raters was also calculated for the PET speaking test. For this, the Pearson correlation coefficient which is a parametric test could be run. Prior to this calculation, however, the normality of the distribution had to be checked. As Table 1 shows, the skewness divided by its standard error was -0.35 (-0.086 / 0.241) which falls between ± 1.96 meaning that it was a normal distribution. Hence, running the above parametric statistic was legitimized.

As Table 2 indicates, the correlation between the two sets of scores given by the two raters was significant. for this purpose as the distribution of the scores was normal (the skewness ratio).

Posttest Analysis

The descriptive statistics of the posttest in both the control and experimental groups appears in Table 3.

As the Table 3 reveals, the mean of the experimental group (6.37) was higher than that of the control group (3.40). However, further statistical analysis was required to see whether this difference was significant or not.

To verify the null hypothesis of the study, the researchers conducted the independent samples t-test. Prior to this, again the normality of distribution of these scores within each group had to be checked. Going back to Table 3, the skewness ratio of the control group stood at -0.46 (-0.199 / 0.427) while that of the experimental group was 0.028 (0.012 / 0.427). As both values fell between ± 1.96 meaning that they were both normal distributions, running a t-test was

	Rater 01	Rater 02
Rater 01		
Pearson Correlation		
Sig. (2-tailed)	1	.921**
N		.000
Rater 02	100	100
Pearson Correlation		
Sig. (2-tailed)	.921**	1
N	.000	
	100	100

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2. Inter-Rater Reliability between Rater 1 and Rater 2 in the Speaking Part of the PET

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Control	30	2	5	3.40	.85	.199	.427
Experimental	30	4	9	6.37	1.58	0.12	.427
Valid N (listwise)	30						

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for the Posttest

legitimized.

As Table 4 below indicates, with the F value of 18.84 at the significance level of 0.00 being smaller than 0.05, the variances between the two groups were significantly different. Therefore, the results of the t-test with the assumption of heterogeneity of the variances were reported here. Since the p value was 0.00 which is smaller than 0.05, there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups at the posttest.

It can thus be concluded that the presupposed null hypothesis was rejected meaning that the difference observed between sample means was large enough to be attributed to the differences between population means and therefore not due to sampling errors.

Following the rejection of the null hypothesis, the researchers were interested to know how much of the obtained difference could be explained by the independent variable. To determine the strength of the findings of the research, that is, to evaluate the stability of the research findings across samples, effect size was also estimated. The observed power (Cohen's d) stood at 0.76. According to Mackey and Gass (2005), such a value is generally considered a large effect size. Therefore, the findings of the study could be considered strong enough for the purpose of moderate generalization.

Discussion and Conclusion

The outcome of the posttest analysis depicted that

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig.	Mean Std. Error	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	18.84	.000	-9.017	58	.000	-2.967 .329	-3.625	-2.308
Equal variances not assumed			-9.017	44.54	.000	-2.967 .329	-3.629	-2.304

Table 4. Independent Samples t-Test of the Experimental and Control Groups

teaching phrasal verbs through pictures had a significant effect on EFL students' active application of phrasal verbs in speaking. This is to say that the use of pictures in the teaching of phrasal verbs significantly increased learners' achievement.

Although this study was limited in duration and scope, the results clearly support the findings of earlier research which favor the notion that pictorial cues accelerate achievement as well as bearing positive impacts on certain important factors such as motivation, enjoying the class, and increasing the power to guess (Chu, 1996; Driscoll & Rowley, 1997; Sherry, 1996; Schriver, 1997; Wiedenbeck, 1999).

Pictorial teaching is a feasible teaching method with characteristics compatible with the current wave of educational reform in Iran, especially with respect to the aim of fostering basic competencies of students. Such teaching does not only enhance students' overall achievement and boost their motivation towards learning English as a foreign language, it also cultivates the students' overall ability as human beings thenceforth facilitating the ability to guess and imagine.

Based on the findings of this study, one can conclude that there is significant distinction in fostering pictorial teaching designed for EFL classrooms and implementing communicative language learning activities to comprise higher achievement and better understanding. In addition to the final outcome of using such activities which clearly delineated a more significant achievement of those exposed to them, the researcher observed a much higher degree of joy among the students in the experimental group while guessing the meaning of phrasal verbs from the pictures on the board. Furthermore, it was revealed that the progression of conveying the meaning via these pictures was more rapid and unhampered.

When there is a significant difference between teaching phrasal verbs with pictures and without pictures, teaching phrasal verbs with pictures can be a reasonable substitution for or at least an addition to language learning activities. The teacher can select different phrasal verbs and different pictures related to their meaning and the following points need to be observed in the process of

implementing pictorial teaching at a large scale.

- It is essential that teachers be given intensive training on how to implement pictorial teaching and benefits of doing so before attempting to make it part of the curriculum. It is also a sound idea to teach some parts of L2 which is possible with pictures.
- Such initiatives need to be complemented with support networks and ready-made materials to increase the likelihood that all teachers would adopt this approach to teaching and learning in proper way.
- One of the key challenges for teachers not only in Iran but in many educational environments is adopting such approaches where decisions are often made by administrators whose primary interest may not be the teachers or students themselves. More engagement with the management level is required to promote pictorial teaching and to encourage them to support its advantageous application.

If pictorial teaching is going to become a large-scale success, planning beyond the classroom by the teacher is indispensable. Hence, it is a feasible suggestion to start introducing phrasal verbs at elementary levels so that students can get used to them and their meanings in the context.

Appendix A:

Phrasal Verbs Used in the Treatment

1. To Take up = To begin
2. To Throw away = To discard
3. To Put off = To postpone
4. To Clean out = To clean inside of something
5. To Chill out = To relax
6. To Get ahead = To succeed
7. To Hand out = To give something such as book to some one
8. To Hang out = To spend a lot of time with someone
9. To Call for = To require
10. To Put up = To build

11. To show up = To arrive
12. To point out = To show
13. To call up = To telephone
14. To talk over = To discuss
15. To watch out = To be careful
16. To figure out = To understand, To solve
17. To pick up = To lift
18. To look for = To search
19. To pick out = To select
20. To think up = To invent, To create
21. To mix up = To confuse
22. To make friends = To become friends
23. To dress up = To wear formal clothes
24. To tear up = To rip

Appendix B:

Pictures Used in the Treatment

(Illustrated by Shahrzad Mojabi)

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